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ABSTRACT

Many aspects of discipline-based art education (DBAE) can be used with mentally retarded students and the effects of this approach can be exciting and fulfilling for them. Art criticism activities improve mentally retarded students' visual awareness, verbal skills, and ability to think independently. They are able to progress through the steps of art criticism, describe, analyze, interpret, and make judgments. Philosophical questions such as, what is good art, or where should art be shown, also can be addressed. Art history activities can include finding clues to discover which art work is older, using mathematics skills to develop timelines, discussing fashion and other relics depicted in art, and employing other methods of basic historical inquiry. Studio activities should be balanced between two dimensional and three dimensional experiences. A minimal number of objectives should be set for each class period. Lessons should build on concepts taught in the regular classroom and be presented in units to help students learn from repetition. Students should be involved in making choices, solving problems, and talking about art. Teachers should expect and encourage students to succeed as a positive attitude and atmosphere helps build self-esteem. Some artists suitable for individual lessons and units of study include Andy Warhol, Andrew Wyeth, Henri Matisse, and Vincent Van Gogh. (KM)

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ART FOR THE MENTALLY RETARDED
METHODOLOGY AND TECHNIQUES FOR
A BROAD BASED APPROACH

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A Workshop Presented at the
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by

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ART EDUCATION AND THE MENTALLY RETARDED

Art educators have many admirable goals for their students. From manipulating clay to mixing the color green with watercolors, art teachers have many attainable objectives. Some of the most admirable and attainable goals are often overlooked or under utilized in the art classroom. The need for students to be problem solvers and critical thinkers using the skills of criticism, art philosophy, and art history in addition to art production is often overlooked. These objectives are rarely attempted in the art for special education classroom. Many art teachers believe that it is hard enough to have mentally retarded students make art let alone solve other art related problems. Goals in all four disciplines are equally attainable with the mentally retarded.

My personal beliefs about art education for mentally retarded students can be neatly summarized in a statement by Viktor Lowenfeld. Lowenfeld stated:

It is one of my deepest innermost convictions that wherever there is a spark of the human spirit- no matter how dim it may be- it is our sacred responsibility as humans, teachers, and educators to fan it into whatever flame it conceivably may develop.

All humans have the ability to create, express themselves, solve problems, and think critically. Mentally retarded students can do all of the aforementioned things but have one or more handicaps to overcome to do so. Not the least of these handicaps is the one teachers impose on them by having limited expectations. The norm for art for special education is to have the students produce the same artwork, the same way, at the same time (cookbook art). It is my belief that any structured art class can lead to the development of skills in the four disciplines if these skills are valued by the art teacher. The instructor must be committed to their work with the students to help these students live more productive and worthwhile lives.

DISCIPLINE BASED ART EDUCATION AND THE MENTALLY RETARDED

Mentally retarded students can be actively involved in many aspects of Discipline Based Art Education. Even though their involvement may be labeled primitive by some standards, the effect of this approach to art education for mentally retarded students can be an exciting and fulfilling endeavor. Mentally retarded students can...

Look at and analyze art.	(CRITICISM)
Talk about art.	(PHILOSOPHY & CRITICISM)
Deal with art using historical perspectives	(ART HISTORY)

Make art fashioned like or
imitating a style or artist

(ART PRODUCTION)

As objectives must be varied and adjusted for the various grade levels, also they must be adjusted for mentally retarded students. Expectations should be attainable as well as realistic for the group of students you are working with.

Many of the objectives which are very achievable with TMR students will be possibly unachievable with Severely and Profoundly retarded students. Modified activities which mock DBAE activities however, are quite useful in this situation. S&P students can react to works of art in limited ways. Color and shape are just two areas that many of these students can react to in a work of art. Some may be able to verbally react to any given work while others may even begin to attempt to imitate what they see. While this would not be the most successful primary mode of instruction, with some creativity and foresight the instructor can utilize some of the DBAE teaching strategies in S&P student instruction.

ART CRITICISM

Art criticism activities improve mentally retarded students visual awareness, verbal skills, and ability to do independent thinking. Students become better able to deal with works of art as a whole after they have discovered things about specific portions of any given art work. Mentally retarded students are able to progress through the steps of criticism.

They can DESCRIBE works of art looking for obvious details, naming what is seen in the artwork, and discussing the general theme of the work.

They can ANALYZE works of art by looking for specific details (this may be teacher directed looking), discussing colors, forms etc., and by searching out details.

They can INTERPRET works of art by offering their opinions about what is happening in the work, what happened the moment before or after the event, or by offering other interpretive statements about the work.

They can make JUDGMENTS about works of art by stating preferences, offering opinions about family members who may like the work, or stating the purpose in a work of art.

The criticism activities and reactions of mentally retarded students varies greatly from extremely basic statements to complex ideas. These individuals are effected differently by different works of art just like non-retarded individuals. Educators should be open minded and flexible in their interpretations and judgments. By allowing students to talk about art, pleasant surprises may occur.

AESTHETICS (ART PHILOSOPHY)

Mentally retarded students are able (in a limited capacity) to discuss philosophical questions or big questions about art. Being raised primarily to understand only naturalistic art forms, these students are surprised and sometimes shocked by other art forms. Brief philosophical questions or debates can occur in the art classroom. These include discussing "What is art?", "What is good art?", and "Where should art be shown?" I have found that movements like pop art and op art are good starting points for lessons dealing with these philosophical issues. Once they have dealt with these issues more complex ideas may be discussed.

Art educators should have expectations about the results of these activities, however they will not be complex. They have to be teacher directed with specific goals in mind. Students may be able to answer yes or no to a question directed about an artwork but they may be limited in backing up their answer with a well defined reason.

ART HISTORY

Mentally retarded students are able to address historical aspects of art in a limited degree. While they have little or no concept of long periods of time, they are able to deal with time as it relates to their lifetime, their parents lifetime, and other people with whom they are related to. Historical activities can include finding clues to discover which artwork is older, using math skills to develop timelines, discussing fashion and other relics depicted in art, and other methods of basic historical inquiry.

The mentally retarded tend to have a respect for old things. They also have a natural curiosity about artists, when and how they lived, and if they are currently living and working today. They seem to fall into the old way of thinking "If the artist is not dead, it must not be good art." The art teacher can capitalize on these ideas and use them as starting points for art history activities.

It should not be expected that the mentally retarded will remember dates, periods of time, or even movements to art. With continued exposure, however, they are able to retain artists names (occasionally only the first name) and information about their work. This is truly legitimate historical inquiry.

ART PRODUCTION

I am an advocate against "cookbook" art for the mentally retarded. These students are able to develop solutions on their own to problems. The art educator must be willing to accept their solutions no matter how primitive they are. With this acceptance art teachers will begin to discover how these students are putting together concepts and developing skills in studio art. They will also be influenced by the art they are seeing, discussing, and exploring.

I am also a firm believer that studio activities should be balanced between two dimensional and three dimensional experiences. There is no research to prove the commonly accepted

thought that mentally retarded students respond better to 3-D activities. As in normal students, individuals respond differently to experiences in clay, drawing, painting, crafts, printmaking, and the other studio disciplines. A balanced program should be a balance with provisions made for the various handicaps within any given situation.

ART FOR THE MENTALLY RETARDED—METHODOLOGY THAT WORKS!

With the enhancement of an art education program for mentally retarded students, the task of teaching these students can be an exciting and stimulating experience. The unpleasantness associated with this task can be eliminated with the implementation of basic changes in the approach to teaching these students. The basic and first key to success is acceptance of these students. Mentally retarded students are as human as we are. They shed tears and experience joy. They have good and bad days. These students should be treated normally. Educators should delight in what they are able to do and what they are able to learn.

Mentally retarded students can learn. Learning need not be limited to the training that is associated with atypical child education. Learning can be real. Atypical students can be excited about art. They can talk about and inquire about art. These experiences are real and substantial. We must be willing to admit that the art criticism, art history, aesthetics, and art production we participate in as adult artists is not the same as the activities these students are involved in. We must be willing to accept their experiences as true experiences. When an atypical child makes the statement, "It looks like a lady," in reference to a non-objective sculpture he has just encountered, it is an interpretive statement. It may lack sophistication but it is heartfelt and real.

When students are involved in art experiences other than making art, it has a dramatic effect on their lives. The activity of looking at art stays with the students long after they leave the artroom. The students will begin to identify art wherever they go. They find art in their classroom, in books, and even at the local shopping mall. These experiences are shared with their instructors. The students are anxious and hungry to look at and talk about art. The excitement is already there when they walk in the door. There are few mentally retarded students who are not positively anxious about art class. The excitement, however, can be more than just making Easter bunnies and snowmen.

PLANNING

Planning is a key to success. In addition to lesson planning, activity analysis of each individual lesson aids in the total success of the lesson. The Activity Analysis Form was developed to aid in planning and anticipating the needs during any given lesson. It can be used to aid the instructor in knowing what probably will happen and what they can do to have success. This preliminary planning which will take just a few minutes will also assist the art teacher in anticipating the flow of the

lesson including flow of the students within the artroom environment.

SEATING ARRANGEMENTS

Seating arrangements for students can be a key to success or failure in many lessons. The instructor must learn how each student interacts with their classmates in individual and group situations. When these traits are learned, the seating may vary according to lesson, objectives, mood, and other factors which effect student performance. Some students can act as a role model to encourage less willing or able students to participate. Other students can serve as peer helpers, pointing out something in an artwork, helping to remember that yellow and blue make green, or recalling the name Picasso. Student seating arrangements and configurations should be changed to meet the demands of the lesson. Get them close if they need to see detail. Allow the students to walk around, not only to get materials but also to interact with art.

THE UNIT APPROACH

Another successful technique is using theme, media, or an artist for units of multiple lessons. Mentally retarded students learn from repetition. By studying artists or works of art for multiple lessons, the students become familiar with the artist, concepts involved, as well as the media being explored. When familiarity is achieved the students will become more willing to respond verbally and visually.

CHOICES

Allowing choices with media aids in developing creative simulation, problem solving, and the development of critical thinking skills. Choosing a general media for a unit such as drawing and then changing the specific drawing tool will excite the students and keep their interest. Simple choices between colored pencils and markers allows them to become involved in the initial steps of problem solving. When choices are offered, the student should be required to make a choice. This will add to their sense of responsibility and self esteem.

BROAD BASED ART INSTRUCTION

Art cannot be taught by technique alone. Students should be involved in aesthetics, art criticism, and art history activities. One of the simplest ways to do this is through the use of visuals, reproductions, and actual works of art. When talking about Warhol's soup cans, the reproduction and a stack of soup cans will make the concepts more concrete. They need to see, touch, smell, and sometimes taste. The use of all of the senses will add to the learning process and sensual experience which can

develop aesthetic sensitivity. These experiences will assist the students in retaining the valuable information in the lessons.

VISUAL RESOURCES

Another approach which is successful with the mentally retarded is the utilization of fine and popular art being exhibited within the building. Short excursions to different parts of the building are special events. They change the pace of the lesson and allow the students to become involved in their daily work. Through this activity the students become active observers. This skill can be used in the art lesson at hand and within their daily lives.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT

Finally, a major key to success with mentally retarded students is a positive atmosphere. Instructors should grasp the positive anticipation which walks in with the majority of students. Very few other occasions exist for art educators where the student can be excited and motivated at the prospect of working with a particular media or tackling a work of art. The instructor must think positively. When a failure occurs, use it as a learning experience. A statement like "Let's do it together," encourages students and builds self-esteem. When the students are positive and enjoying themselves the instructor will do the same. Pick up cues from your students. They come in verbal and non-verbal forms. These cues can be a valuable tool.

ARTISTS

Below is a list of some of the artists used in individual lessons and units of study.

Pennsylvania Artists

Concepts

Calder	Mobiles, Stables, Circus, Abstract Forms
Warhol	Pop Art
Eakins	Realism
Wyeth	Realism. Point of View
Pennsylvania Potters	Historical Pottery and Containers, Coil, Slab, and Thrown Forms
Local Sculptors	Non-Objective and Figurative Sculpture

Other Artists

Matisse	Color, Shape, and Pattern Free Expression
Van Gogh	Portraiture, Impressionism
Picasso	Portraiture, Cubism, Distortion
Non-Western Artists	Multicultural Concepts Integration in a mixed society

POSITIVE STEPS FOR TEACHING THE MENTALLY RETARDED

1. Know the student's handicaps.
2. Use task analysis. (Know what to expect)
3. Set a minimal number of objectives for each class period.
4. Work with the students base teacher and link up with concepts being taught in the regular classroom.
5. Involve the students.
 - Talk about art.
 - Look at art.
 - Have the students make choices.
 - Have the students solve simple problems.
6. Use a broad based approach to art education.
7. Vary the students experiences. (Vary media, artist, etc.)
8. Use repetition.
9. Expect and encourage students to succeed.
10. Expect to fail--occasionally. Learn from your mistakes.
11. Keep a positive attitude.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

While there are no totally all inclusive resources for information on teaching art to the mentally retarded, here are a few I have found especially helpful.

Art Educators of New Jersey
Insights- Art in Special Education
Art Educators of New Jersey, 1976
Millburn, NJ 07041

James, Philip
Teaching Art to Special Students
1983, J.Weston Walch, Publishers
Portland, Maine 04104

Karnes, Merle
Creative Art For Living
1979, The Council For Exceptional Children
Reston, VA 22091

Kelchner, Thomas A.

An Approach to Enhance the Critical Thinking and Problem
Solving Skills of Mentally Retarded Students Through a
Broad Based Approach to Art Education
1989. An Unpublished Masters Thesis
Kutztown University
Kutztown, PA 19530

Kerns, Lola, Editor

Readings: Developing Arts Programs for Handicapped
Students
1981, Arts in Special Education Project
Harrisburg, PA

Lowenfeld, Viktor

Creative and Mental Growth 3rd Edition
The MacMillan Company
New York, NY

(The early editions of this book include a chapter
titled "Therapeutic Aspects of Art Education")

Rodriguez, Susan

The Special Artists Handbook
1984. Prentice-Hall Inc.
Englewood Cliffs, NJ